

By Daniel Vollrath within a special education teaching and learning environment. Daniel Vollrath (@HabitsOfMindInc) is a special education teacher at Hunterdon Central Regional High School in New Jersey, and a United States Professional Development Trainer for the Habits of Mind Institute, with a strong passion for developing curriculum, classroom culture, and mindfulness based on the Habits of Mind. Over the past five years, Daniel has gathered student and teacher reflections with the Habits of Mind which has led to a better understanding in reference to a blend of learning and dispositional thinking.

Daniel will be presenting selected reflections within a monthly series. This blog is part 2 within the series.



Exploration with the Habits of Mind



To explore means to be curious about something-- to question it, to poke at it, and eventually want to do something with what you learned. Exploration is a part of life that keeps us striving to continuously learn as we develop as human beings. In the classroom, when exploration and curiosity successfully mesh within an activity, and students are engaged with learning, nothing is more rewarding for a teacher. So, assuming you are curious and want to experiment with how Habits of Mind will have an impact on the learning and productive behaviors of your students or, perhaps, you are wondering whether special needs students can really learn the habits, join me as I share the results of my explorations. So, get ready to delve in and get curious!

Exploration

From the perspectives of four special education teachers, you will gain sense of their experience in creating lessons, activities, and avenues that incorporate the Habits of Mind into curriculum and class culture. What is unique about these four teachers is that each found the Habits of Mind connected more to a specific feature of teaching in relation to exploration. These features were set up into four sub-themes within exploration: classroom management, lesson planning and activities, modeling, and group work.

Classroom management

“It was amazing, the Habits of Mind became an impactful strategy for maintaining order, developing a conducive learning environment, but most importantly, they became a language that all my students could identify with.” - English Teacher

Over the course of a semester, the English teacher found her sophomore English class increasing productive behaviors centered around the Habits of Mind. For instance, prior to implementing the habits into the behaviors/expectations for the course, the teacher focused on a typical behavior policy that students were accustomed to in all of their classes. In order to make her class a Habits of Mind-based classroom, she infused habits into the desired behaviors deemed important for success within her course. When utilizing the language of the habits in addressing inappropriate behaviors, the more likely students were able to relate the terminology to the misbehavior, which then led to more mindful appropriate actions. By identifying a habit, matching it with the inappropriate behavior, and then having a discussion incorporating the habit and behavior, revealed amazing results. The idea of addressing the behavior with a Habit of Mind is illustrated in this reflection:

Everyday during the first week of school a student was interrupting class. Managing impulsivity was his problem. So I approached him after the first week and reviewed with him the habit of managing impulsivity. We discussed his action of interrupting, then matched it with his inability to manage his impulsivity. Then we brainstormed ideas to help manage this behavior. We came up with the idea to write down his thoughts instead of yelling out. He loved this idea and made sure that each day he had a piece of paper, to serve as a reminder, on his desk to write ideas on.

Take-away: Keep it simple! Forming a game plan that connects the “habit” with the “behavior”, gives a clear picture of the action that will help transpire productive behavior.

Lesson planning

“When I explain to my students the Habits of Mind going to be utilized within an activity, they seem to grasp an understanding on how they connect. This helps focus their learning and behavior.” - Science Teacher

The most fascinating aspect of teaching is the opportunity to be creative, unique, and diverse within instruction and strategies. For the science teacher, exploring new ideas and strategies with the Habits of Mind, became more intriguing and motivating throughout the year. It was an opportunity that offered a different approach to learning for her students, and at the same time allowed her to be open-minded within lesson planning. Over time she was able to find a fit between that Habits of Mind, objectives, and goals for units. Her consistency and confidence with infusing the habits into instruction and learning became apparent. In an interview with the teacher, she explains more about connecting the habits to activities:

Researcher: Can you clarify how you incorporate the Habits of Mind into your course? Can you give an example activity?

Teacher: I found that the more I tried new ideas and used my creativity, I was able to successfully incorporate the habits into everything I did in class. You can find a habit for anything you do.

The habits were part of the classroom culture and focus for learning. An example was a reading activity about population, geography, and water systems in Africa. In connection to this activity, the habit of listening with understanding and empathy was equally important. Students were able to understand cultural differences and struggles of people in this country pertaining to their life. Overall students were able to blend their learning of science with a habit.

Take-away: Be creative and open-minded with your planning. Ask yourself, “What habits are important and a natural fit within the information I want to convey to my students?”

Modeling and discussion

“The approach of explaining, indicating, referencing, and talking about the habits in class is important. Although, modeling the habits within the classroom makes the biggest impact.” - Math Teacher

Modeling can be a powerful and skillful strategy when effectively implemented in the classroom. The math teacher found that modeling the Habits of Mind evoked many discussions geared around the process of solving problems. Particular habits were identified as an integral part of the course and utilized within the “math language”. Students were always referencing the habits while speaking out loud about solving problems, thinking patterns, and process. The math teacher explains:

Students are really focusing on using the habits of mind as a common language in the classroom. In particular, within the process of solving equations, word problems, or brain teasers at the board. For example, one student mentioned, “In order to solve this problem I had to think flexibly. Most people would solve it this way, although I found it easier to do it that way, as shown on the board. At first the problem was hard to solve, but after thinking interdependently with my friend, I was able to understand the issues I was having.”

It is clear that this student was familiar with the habits of thinking interdependently and thinking flexibly. Clearly, not only was the student able to solve the problem, he was able to talk about the process of thinking behind it. He understood and described the ability to produce the productive behaviors within his thinking. The teacher has found that using a common language within her math course was important to infusing the habits with instruction. She makes this clear by the following statement:

It is so rewarding to find my students using a common language, the Habits of Mind, within their learning of math problems. Although not all Habits of Mind are utilized, my students can connect the most important ones to their solving skills. Another neat aspect is that all students understand the habits and how they are used within math. I feel my class is truly building a culture for learning.

Take-away: Model and consistently use the Habits of Mind language within conversation, connection to material, and as a way of building culture.

Group work with the Habits of Mind

The idea of working effectively in groups is essential in school and life. Within a history class, presentations, projects, discussions, and a multitude of collaboration is required for success to occur. The history teacher found that the Habits of Mind played an integral role in the ability to present effective collaboration within the course. Throughout the course, the teacher identified the Habits of Mind as a guide and pathway to group success. As a catalyst to this focus, the teacher created a Habits of Mind chart that students used within their groups, as a guide to stay focused. For example, when students became distracted within the group, the designated leader made sure to announce for everyone to get focused and persist. Or, get focused and strive for accuracy, manage impulsivity, think interdependently, etc., you get the picture? Here is how the teacher explains the effectiveness of the Habits of Mind in group work:

All my students show that they are really thinking about the habits during group work. If one person goes off-task, the group leader brings them back and connects a Habit of Mind to their mission. For example, one group became completely off topic about halfway through working. The group leader said, “Everybody let’s stop talking off topic and instead focus on managing our impulsivity, striving for accuracy with getting the information correct, and being clear and precise with our communication, we need to be more focused on the topic and ideas.” My student was referencing the Habits of Mind chart on his desk and pointed to the habits needed to get the job done. That was really a cool thing to see in my classroom. Students are focusing on habits and building their skills, both behaviorally and academically. I love it!

Take-away: Always have a reference guide of the Habits of Mind for students to use during work time. This can be a great way to maintain focus and productivity. Here is an app with each habit and definition to utilize with students <http://www.habitsofmindinstitute.org/resources/artifacts/>.

Final Thoughts

When habits are implemented successfully into a classroom the outlook and perception can change in regard to many elements. Each subject discussed supports the idea that the Habits of Mind can relate to a variety of disciplines, teaching styles, students, and class dynamics. The teachers illustrate the importance of exploring and finding how the habits work best for them. Each subject area teacher displayed a different method for incorporating the habits into their class. Although all habits of mind were not discussed, it was inferred that teachers felt comfortable with the ability to explore certain habits as they related to teaching, activities, strategies, behavior, and establishing a class culture.

Now, are you ready to further explore?